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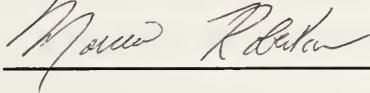




# Anne Spencer: The Harlem Renaissance Hybrid

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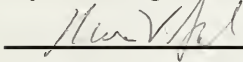
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The literature of the Harlem Renaissance is often regarded as the finest works of black literature, rife with experimentation and resonance. However, many overlook the art's broadness in terms of gender, theme, and influence. Anne Bethel Spencer (1882-1975) is an artist that clearly shows the breadth of this distinct era for African-Americans. She is a little-known poet often overshadowed by the Harlem Renaissance greats: "the Shakespeare of Harlem" Langston Hughes, the controversial Claude McKay, and the intellectual Countee Cullen. Her themes often focus on the plight of African-Americans in a racist world, but also highlight universal feelings and concerns (love, death, freedom). This hybridity was not uncommon in the Harlem Renaissance, as shown directly by Spencer's close friends and contemporaries, Angelina Weld Grimke and Georgia Douglas Johnson. Besides writing on themes of race, love, and death, the three women wrote from a feminist perspective, highlighting not only the racial problems of 1920's America, but also the gender issues of the same period. Spencer's life matched the hybrid nature of her poetry. She was a "Renaissance woman" who wore many hats, a social activist, feminist, poet and educator who embodied Alian Locke's "thinking Negro." Though a lesser-known poet in the Harlem Renaissance canon, Spencer is an interesting hybrid of the movement's literary trends and ideologies.

### **Anne Spencer: The Voice**

The use of black primitivism in literary works became a dominant issue for Harlem Renaissance writers. The presence of black diction and the focus on the exotic elements of Africa were seen as ways in which African-Americans could connect with their African roots. "For some American blacks, primitivism was strongly tied to the





Africanization of the American Negro and the search for a more remote, naturally good, and uncorrupted Africa—free from the white racism manifested in Western civilization” (Singh 6). Claude McKay, one of the most well known poets who used primitivism heavily, published *Home to Harlem* in 1928 and the work met the criticism of W.E.B. DuBois for its lack of racial refinement. Yet, many writers chose to hold onto their Western forms of expression and unite them with their assessment of racial problems in America. Anne Spencer and her contemporaries, especially Grimke and Douglas Johnson, utilize this hybrid nature.

Spencer is not alone in this amalgam of Victorian and Harlem Renaissance conventions. Angelina Grimke, an established poet before the Harlem Renaissance, wrote and published several poems on racial concerns, including “Tenebris” and “The Black Finger”, and sometimes black diction (“Lullaby”). However, she also used Victorian forms (sonnet, triolets, roundels), and wrote on such universal themes as love and death. Grimke’s racial poems only make up a small portion of her body of work.

We may say that the three major themes of Grimke’s poetry are lost love, commemoration of famous people, and African-American racial concerns, but we must acknowledge that racial concerns constitute less than five percent of her total output of poetry (Herron 2).

Georgia Douglas Johnson similarly focuses on universal concerns, love and loneliness, in her first book of poems, *The Heart of a Woman*, published before the Harlem Renaissance in 1918. During the Harlem Renaissance, however, she published *Bronze* (1922), which focused on racial concerns. *Bronze* was written chiefly to show Douglas Johnson’s race consciousness.



My first book was *The Heart of a Woman*. It was not at all race conscious. Then, someone said--- she has no feelings for the race. So I wrote *Bronze*—it is entirely racial and one section entirely deals with motherhood—that motherhood that has its basic note—black children born to the world’s displeasure (Hull 2).

Douglas Johnson’s *Bronze* was written to show her affinity for her heritage, using traditional sonnets for her heroes, including John Brown, W.E.B. DuBois, and Abraham Lincoln. Douglas Johnson similarly used forms that were found in Victorian poetry: Shakespearean and Italian sonnets, iambic heptameter lines, and quatrains. Spencer, Grimke, and Douglas Johnson all used the Victorian forms they learned in their education to express their feelings regarding the African-American race in 1920’s America.

The Harlem Renaissance writers did not solely write on race, as shown by the works of Spencer, Grimke, and Douglas Johnson. Spencer’s work is often a hybrid of thematic pursuits, tying in an array of topics that examine the contents of the human heart, soul, and mind. Her first published poem, “Before the Feast of Shushan”, attests to the multi-layered dimension of her work. Touching on the varied subjects of feminism and Victorian love, it is a reflection of Spencer’s thematic complexity. “Shushan”, one of Spencer’s early poems, shows the sophistication of a learned female who benefited from the education that her companion, W.E.B. DuBois, promoted in “The Talented Tenth.” Spencer weaves together two seemingly different topics, racial and gender conflict. Though “Before the Feast of Shushan” is free of racial allusions, its central theme involves the belief most prevalent in Spencer’s canon of poetry—freedom.

The narrator, a king, possesses a voice not of a monarch, but of an indulgent lover. He spouts hyperbole, evoking a sensual, almost feminine voice in the work. “Tell yet what range in color wakes the eye/ Sorceror, release the dreams born here when/



drowsy, shifting palm-shade enspells the brain” (lines 4-6). The language and imagery that follow are suitably dream-like. “Before these star-noted birds escaped from paradise awhile to/ stir all dark, and dear, and passionate desire, till mine/ arms go out to be mocked by the softly kissing body of the wind” (lines 8-10). The king is freed from inhibitions to profess his love for Vashti.

However, his words are not of pure intention. The king wants to make love to the Persian queen Vashti in the Bible. “Or closer press to crush a grape, ‘gainst lips redder/ Than the grape, a rose in the night of her hair;/ Then---Sharon’s rose in my arms” (lines 22-24). While this has elements of the Victorian love poetry of Spencer’s favorite poet, Browning, the tone of the piece is more sensual than romantic. The king values Vashti’s physical attributes, and sees her as a sexual object he wants to conquer. “And I am hard to force the petals wide;/ And you are fast to suffer and be sad” (lines 25-26). The image of “the petals wide” suggests the queen’s virginity, and the king wants to violently force himself on her. The preceding image likewise seems to follow the strain of romanticism, “Sharon’s Rose in my arms”, but the “my” is possessive, suiting the latter image where the king is the sexual aggressor. The succeeding images of their relationships are images of fulfillment, religious mixed with sensual. The sacrament of the communion ties in with the king’s want for sexual fulfillment. “How him maze how you say love is sacrament/ how says Vashti, love is both bread and wine;/ How to the altar may not come to break and drink/ Hunky flesh nor fleshly spirit” (lines 29-32). The king continues with images of sexual hunger. “I, thy lord, like not manna for meat as a Judahn/ I, thy master, drink, and red wine, plenty, and when/ I thirst. Eat meat, and full, when I hunger./ I, thy King, teach you and leave you, when I list” (lines 33-36).



After telling of his impending fulfillment and hunger, the king asserts that he will conquer Vashti. “No woman in all Persia sets out a strange action/ to confuse Persia’s lord/ Love is but desire and thy purpose fulfillment/ I, thy King, so say”(lines 37-40). The king is adamant that a sexual union will occur. Yet, underneath the king’s confident command, the underlying feminist voice of the poet breaks through. The fact that Vashti purposefully confuses the king, “to confuse Persia’s lord”, shows that she has taken the initiative to refuse him. She has taken hold of her freedom in setting boundaries on their relationship, therefore making her the dominant partner in the poem. Spencer was inspired to write “Before the Feast of Shushan” after reading a passage in the book of Esther, the Jewish queen of Persia who saved the Jews from a massacre (Greene 30). Esther remains one of the few noteworthy women in the Bible, a figure who represents spiritual strength, duty, and compassion. Spencer chose a commendable woman because the poem, although subtly, has feminist leanings. Vashti has the king in her control, though the king thinks otherwise. She remains unconquered by the end of the poem. “Before the Feast of Shushan” uses Victorian love conventions to promote the voice of feminism, easily incorporating two themes.

“Before the Feast of Shushan” uses Victorian love to its advantage, a base for a modern version of feminism. In the canon of her poetry, Spencer readily uses the Victorian notion of love, sweeping love that transcends the adversities of time, namely death, but Spencer ties the natural limits of a garden, an enclosed but beautiful space, to the perpetual quality of love. In “Any Wife to Any Husband: A Derived Poem”, a poem that mirrors Robert Browning’s “Any Wife to Any Husband”, Spencer refers to the garden in represents the world as a whole. “This small garden is half my world/ I am





nothing to it- when all is said” (lines 1-2). Though the garden is a living entity capable of undergoing death, the narrator insists that the elements of the garden will continue to thrive in her absence. “I plant the thorn and kiss the rose/ But they will grow when I am dead” (lines 3-4).

Browning’s poem also has a narrator who believes in the ongoing process of life after his death. He finds it not in the garden, but in the soul as a carrier of human affection.

I have but to be by thee, and thy hand  
will never let mine go, nor heart withstand  
the beating of my heart to reach its place.  
When shall I look for thee and feel thee gone?  
When cry for the old comfort and find none?  
Never, I know! Thy soul is thy face! (lines 7-12)

The narrator chooses to hold on to the memory of his lover by finding her soul in her face; the memory of her face, the façade of her innermost being, will live on as a testament long after the narrator has died.

Additionally, the narrators in both poems demand that their respective loved ones persist in the daily activities of their lives, even as grief becomes a commonplace, resonant emotion as their life proceeds, but also demand that the lovers they left behind remember their relationships. The narrator in Spencer’s poem urges her lover to “feel all human joys, but feel most a ‘shadowy third.’” The shadowy third is the lover’s memory of his past lover, a dark entity that acts as both an aid for comfortable nostalgia and a grim reminder of the loss. Likewise, Browning’s narrator asks to be inscribed in the



memory of his lover, but the last lines of the poem possess the same duality of comfort and grimness that accompanied Spencer's "shadowy third":

Pride? When those eyes forestall the life behind,  
the death I have to go through! When I find,  
now that I want thy help most, all of thee.

Thy love shall hold me fast

Until the last minutes' sleep is past

And I wake saved! And yet it will not be!(lines 120-126)

Both Spencer and Browning's poems manifest a love that transcends the most adverse effects of age and death, with lovers achieving a spiritual union through memory, the continuation of certain feelings after death. They show the idealistic quality of Victorian love, but also its dark undertones, that this idealistic memory is capable of disappearing. Browning's narrator laments that "And, yet it will not be!" and Spencer's narrator urges her lover to remember her, but this is not a guarantee.

Angelina Grimke (1880-1958) shared Spencer's incorporation of Victorian attitudes of love in her poetry. In Grimke's "When the Green Lies Over the Earth", the scene takes place in a single locale, which is similar to Spencer's garden, but which is never blatantly identified.

When the green grass lies over the earth, my dear,  
a mantle of witching grace,  
when the smile and the tear of a young child year,  
dimple across her face. (lines 1-4)



The setting for the poem is a site of purity, a realized Eden. It is reminiscent of Spencer's "this small garden is half my world" in "Any Wife to Any Husband: A Derived Poem", because it is the backdrop for timeless occurrences, namely love and spirituality, even though time is an impediment in both instances. The lover flees to the site, a site where nature has an everlasting quality where time stands still.

And then flee, when the wind all day is sweet,  
with the breath of growing things,  
when the wooing bird lights on restless feet  
and chirrups and trills  
to his lady-love  
in the green above (lines 5-11).

Grimke's use of landscape reflects an ephemeral paradise, easily threatened by the passage of time. Like Spencer and Browning, she recognizes that this ideal time can only stretch so far.

And the gold-hearted daisies this many year  
Have blossomed and bloomed at your feet  
And the little birds just above your head  
With their voice hushed my dear (lines 17-20).

The earlier birds in the poem wooed with "chirrups and trills", a ballad for his lady love, a song of everlasting paradise. The birds in the later part of the poem have been hushed, showing that nature and the quality of their love, shown by the beautiful song of the birds, cannot last forever. The silence of the wooing birds and the image where "blossoms fall on the garden wall, and drift like snow on the green below" (lines



23-25) shows a progression of time, though it is sharply contrasted with the everlasting image of the lover's face. The narrator wishes to maintain the image of the face forever in her memory, even though time is progressing rapidly around her.

For oh! My dear, when the youth's in the year,

Yours is the face that I long to have near,

Yours is the face my, my dear. (lines 29-31)

All the poems end somberly, because though the narrators try to stop time, they ultimately are overcome by natural time, the reality of the world they live in. The speaker in Browning's poem believes his lover will hold him fast "until the little minute's sleep is past and is awake saved." Immediately afterwards, he acknowledges that he will not be granted such a grace. "And yet it will not be!" Spencer's narrator does live on, but merely as "a shadowy third", a personified, immaterial entity that haunts her lover. Grimke's narrator is a realist; she would like to manipulate time, to turn it back, but she cannot. "But the sharp thorn grows on the budding rose, and my heart no more leaps at the sunset glow" (lines 26-28). The Victorian, idealistic love is subject to time, hinting at its mortality, just as "Before the Feast of Shushan" shows an impurity in the king's sexualized view of Vashti.

Spencer's poetic voice is a hybrid of Western traditions (the ideal love of Victorian poetry) and contemporary issues (feminism). Like Georgia Douglas Johnson and Angelina Grimke, she found a distinctive voice of her own in a time where primitivism was an influential trend in poetry and where artists embraced racial consciousness.





### **Anne Spencer: The Feminist**

Feminism is a frequent topic in Spencer's poetry, using well-known figures like Vashti and her own neighbors, most noticeably a washer-woman she admired. The independence of the females in her poems is often overshadowed by powerful outside forces, a male's sexual longing or the chatter of idle gossip. Spencer wanted to give these females independence through her poetry, using modified sonnets and enticing imagery.

"Lady, Lady" is the most notable of several of Spencer's feminist poems which have striking commonalities. "Lady, Lady, I saw your face/ dark as night withholding a star." The "withholding of a star" conveys inner beauty within this ordinary woman, a similar strategy used for "the gay little-girl-of-the-diving-tank" in "At the Carnival" and a village woman who "tripped and fell against a star" in "Innocence." Biographically, the poem could be about a kind washer-woman who worked for the Spencers and whom Spencer deeply respected. Another impetus for the work could be Spencer's relationship with Cousin Lou, a respected community member who was also a washer-woman, a benevolent figure in Spencer's notebooks (Greene 47). Whoever served as the muse for her work was obviously a black female.

In all three poems, the individuality of the narrator is threatened by a patriarchal or societal image that infringes upon the narrator's inner beauty. In "At the Carnival", it is "a bull-necked man" seeing the girl-in-the-diving tank as a sexual distraction ("his itching flesh sees form divine and vibrant health"), compared to the narrator who sees an innocent "darling of spirit and form." In "Innocence", it is the society that takes away the narrator's individuality, because it calls for her to be part of a group rather than an individual. "Just what the villagers lusted for/ to claim her as one of their own." "Lady,



Lady” is the most obvious example of the subject falling victim to a domineering body. “The chisel fell or it might have been/ you had so long born the yoke of men” (lines 3-4). The washer-woman has been suppressed by sexism and racism, her face only “withholding a star.”

Curiously, the racial undertones of “Lady, Lady” do not appear until the fifth line, suggesting Spencer’s dual message, carefully allocating an equal number of lines, four, to each cause. Spencer uses natural imagery to describe the melancholic, weathered appearance of the washer-woman. “Lady, Lady, I saw your hands/ twisted, awry, like crumpled roots” (lines 5-6) Spencer continually uses “root” imagery in her poetical canon, because she realizes that these problems were formed at the beginning. Spencer uses white roots in “Grapes: Still-Life” to indicate that most origins have white roots, that the country she lives in is Anglicized. They are the foundation of future growth, negative growth in this case. The roots are “bleached poor white in a sudsy tub” (line 7).

Physically, her hands are white and wrinkled from the “rub-a-dub”, a result of continual washing. Metaphorically, the continuity of the task and the white roots of the washer woman hint at the oppression of blacks, at a time where the occupation of black females was usually confined to domestic labors. It is a striking commentary with an ordinary subject doing a commonplace activity, but the activity is painful and repetitive. Spencer uses the people around her as muses, whether the lady she hired or Cousin Lou, in her poems to condemn the state of female servitude and black oppression. Spencer also highlights the strength of these women. “Lady, Lady, I saw your heart/ and altered there in its darksome place/ were the tongues of flames the ancients knew/ where the good God



sits to spangle through” (lines 9-12). In the dark crevices of the washer-woman’s heart are the “flames the ancients knew”, a fire that shows the inner strength of the woman.

Perhaps Spencer’s most personal, feminist poem is “Neighbors.” In “Neighbors”, a rhymed quatrain, the poem paints the picture of Spencer as a social outcast. By putting her feelings in four simple lines in a common *abcb* pattern, the form of the poem gives an illusion of childishness, highlighting the childishness of the neighbors she is condemning.

Ah, you are cruel;

You ask too much;

Offered a hand, a finger-tip

You must have a soul to clutch.

They are idle gossipers, not worthy of a sophisticated sonnet or elongated free verse filled with crisp imagery.

The first words of the poem are a direct address to her audience. “Ah, you are cruel.” The cruel “you” are her neighbors, as the title indicates, but also the prescribed notions of womanhood during Spencer’s time. Thus, a poem about neighborly gossip, has another theme of loving one’s self. Spencer was a woman who jumped on the back of grocery wagons, rather than taking Jim Crow transportation, and wore more “indecent fashions”(Greene 90) such as pants. She sat in the white section on trolley cars (Greene 88), helped organize a local chapter of the NAACP in 1918 (Greene 87), and started a black branch of the Jones Memorial Library at Dunbar High School (Greene 83). All of these actions were atypical of a black female in the 1920’s, sparking gossip and public recognition for her activism and her poetry.



The “too much” restrains Spencer in a racial and behavioral box, because the cruel “you” asks her to be like them. “Offered a hand, a finger-tip” is Spencer’s benevolent attitude toward the “cruel you.” Spencer felt she was giving her neighbors a helping hand, a small advancement in her fight to promote human rights for everyone. Her right to be independent was also their right to be independent. Biographer Greene states:

She viewed her personal struggle to human liberty as closely aligned with the struggle of all deprived and disadvantaged people. The joy she derived from her own freedom as a human being was conducive to her ceaseless efforts to fight for the human and civil liberties of others and to break down systematic social, political, and civil restraints (Greene 90).

Yet, in the poem, the hand returns back to the narrator, empty, showing the relationship between the freedom fighter for and the people she’s fighting for. “You must have a soul to clutch.” The helping hand is the rescuer of souls, which hold ideals such as freedom and individuality, but the neighbors lack the same fire. They are merely bodies without souls, lifeless gossipers who are monotonous in their cruelty towards the narrator. The overall tone of the poem is frustration, the frustration of having to conform to society’s standards, thus escaping ridicule, and the frustration of not being able to connect with those around you. Angelina Grimke and Georgia Douglas Johnson also addressed independence and feminism in their works. Like Spencer, Grimke wanted to break free of societal conventions. Her lesbianism, if exposed in 1920’s America, would have faced public consternation.

Being a black lesbian poet in America at the beginning of the twentieth century meant that one wrote (or half wrote)--- in isolation—a lot that [Grimke] did not show and could not publish. It meant that when one did write to be printed—she did so in shackles--- chained between the real experience and the conventions that would not give her a voice” (Hull 145).





Within her home, Grimke wanted to meet her father's strict moral code, which greatly hindered her sexual expression. Most of Grimke's unpublished works center on her sexual preference, and some works that were published had female imagery removed or muted. In the Western form of the triolet, and suitably titled "Triolet", Grimke expresses her feelings for a woman named Molly:

Molly raised shy eyes to me

On an April day;

Close we stood beneath a tree,

Molly raised shy eyes to me,

Shining sweet and wistfully,

Wet and yet quite gay;

Molly raised shy eyes to me

On an April day."

Her poetry was an outlet in her quest to express herself, similar to Spencer's "Neighbors." Her sexual preference, though publicly controversial, was freely spoken through her poetry.

Douglas Johnson, praised as the most influential woman poet of the Harlem Renaissance, was a well-established poet before the movement. Her book of poems *The Heart of a Woman* (1918) largely deals with female frustrations. In 1922, she published *Bronze*, a deviant from her female-orientated work, but in 1928, she returned to the theme of feminism in her heralded *Autumn Love Cycle*. *The Heart of a Woman* is the most explicitly feminist of Douglas Johnson's three books of poems. "The Dream of a



Dreamer” shows Douglas Johnson’s attention to female individuality being stifled under an oppressive society.

The heart of a woman falls back with the night,

And enters some alien cage in its plight

And tries to forget it has dreamed of the stars

While it breaks, breaks, breaks on the sheltering bars. (lines 1-4)

The narrator shows the alienation of an unnamed female, suggesting that this condition could be attributed to any female, “in its plight.” The trapped heart forgets “it has dreamed of the stars”, thus forgetting that it can do anything else but stay within its “alien cage.” The repetition of the verb “breaks” highlights the ongoing nature of the heart’s torture; it continually hurts as it tries to get past the “sheltering bars.” Douglas Johnson uses her craft to portray her feminist voice.

Spencer, Grimke, and Douglas Johnson were restless writers who used their craft to make commentaries on the state of women within American society. Whether preserving their individual longings (Grimke) or calling women to break against the “sheltering bars” (Douglas Johnson), women poets made the plight of their gender an important issues in their respective works.

The process of publication for black female poets, however, reflected the plight of women they often wrote about. Though the hunger for black literature thrived in the 1920’s, it was a particular gendered taste the publishers were looking for. “Though black and white men stand on oppressing sides of the racial mountain in America, they tread on common ground when it comes to the mountain of sex” (Braxton 195). Because



of gender preferentiality, the view of the movement has largely been seen as a male phenomenon:

Despite women writers such as Effie Lee Newsome, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Anne Spencer, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Nella Larsen, and Jessie Fauset, Dorothy West, Helene Johnson, and others, it has been almost impossible to read the critical works and general history of the New Negro/ Harlem Renaissance of the 1920's and get any impression other than the "New Negroes" were entirely of the male sex" (Hernton 139).

The female participants of the Harlem Renaissance were hindered by gender preferentiality, a sexual union that tied white and black male writers together, leaving the female faction in the background. James Weldon Johnson, firmly established as a prominent literary voice in the early 1920's, released his anthology, *The Book of American Poetry*, in 1922, his goal being to introduce the American public to the beauty of African-American poetry. Thirty-one poets were included, only four of whom were female: Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Jessie Fauset, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and Anne Spencer.

James Weldon Johnson, who discovered Anne Spencer in 1918 after visiting her home on Pierce Street, included five poems of Spencer's in his anthology, including her first published poem, "Before the Feast of Shushan." Spencer and Johnson's literary relationship reflects a trend that led to the future notice of black women writers: having ties to an already established male writer. Douglas Johnson shared friendships with many male literary figures including William Stanley Braithwhite and W.E.B. DuBois. Both men praised the work of Douglas Johnson. Braithwhite wrote the introduction of her book *Heart of a Woman* and DuBois contributed a foreward to her second book *Bronze: A Book of Verse*. This male-female relationship to bring black female poetry to the forefront became more frequent with successive anthologies. Sixteen poems of Grimke



appeared in Countee Cullen's *Caroling Dusk* (1927), along with other new, noteworthy female poets, including Lucy Ariel Williams and Gwendolyn Bennett. Writer Louise Berkinow rightly affirms the importance of this trend: "Which writers have survived their time and which have not depends upon who noticed them and chose to record the notice" (Berkinow 1). Though the publication of female poets educated the public about the role and intellect of black, female poets, countering the stereotypical "mammies" of what Locke termed the Old Negro myth, it was largely in the hands of males concerning who would serve as examples for the counterattack. The success of a female poet rested largely in the hands of their male counterparts, and for their feminist ideals to be published, they would have to meet the approval of notable, male literary voices. Carter G. Woodson called Johnson "a poetic genius" (Hull 181), and E.H. Clement praised Grimke by saying that she "possessed a peculiar and wonderful gift" (Hull 114).

Though female literary voices were vocalizing their feminist feelings through their crafts, the industry releasing their art was heavily masculine. The lack of female presences within anthologies and the effective use of male sponsorship show how divided the gender roles of the Harlem Renaissance were. The few exceptions, including Spencer, were uplifted because of their talent. No matter their gender, sexual preference, or motives, these exceptional women exemplified the "New Negro" the movement was desperately trying to implement in the 1920's. Their work, in turn, showcased their literary gifts as well as their literary loyalties.

### **Anne Spencer: The Educator**





In 1923, dressed in her finest, red business dress, Spencer went into Jones Memorial Library, with only James Weldon Johnson's anthology, *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), a copy that contained five of her poems (Greene 82). She believed that being a published poet would ensure her a position at the private white library, and her confidence secured her the job. She became the first African-American to manage the library's facilities. Spencer's story could be seen in many black, female educators in the period of the Harlem Renaissance, as African-American women became the founders, professors, and guiding moral lights for a growing number of institutions. With strong convictions and confidence, black women educators made rooms into libraries, rose from poverty to positions of magnitude, and crafted works that arose from the subjects taught in classrooms.

When Anne Spencer crafted "Dunbar" in 1920, it was written to express her frustration while teaching small children the rudimentary techniques of poetry.

Ah, how poets sing and die!  
Make one song and Heaven takes it;  
Have one heart and Beauty breaks it;  
Chatterton, Shelley, Keats, and I--  
Ah, how poets sing and die!

The inaccessibility of poetry and literature for the children at Dunbar provoked the fiery first line, lamenting the fate of poets: "Ah! How poets sing and die!" Whereas the poets she attempted to teach to the children sang when they were alive, they are now dead because the students cannot read them properly. The power of their words has been buried under ignorance. The lyricism of their poetry was carried with them into heaven.



“Make one song and Heaven takes it”, and the beauty of the poem are broken by its incomprehension. “Have one heart and Beauty breaks it.” The narrator of the poem, presumably Spencer, aligns herself with other notable poets. “Chatterton, Shelley, Keats, and I.” Spencer is aware that one day, her own words might be incomprehensible or misconceived by readers. The power of her contemporaries in this poem is fleeting because of a lack of education. “Ah, how poets sing and die!”

Spencer herself had an education that was far from lacking. While at Virginia Seminary, Spencer studied Latin, mathematics, German, French, and English. Enrolled at age eleven, Annie Bethel Scales, as she was registered, was the youngest student at the seminary. She particularly excelled in the humanities, becoming the top student in these courses. Her courses in science and math were more difficult for Spencer. “In chemistry, I learned the words sulfuric acid and the stink and that’s all” (Greene 24). Her difficulty in math, however, led her to acquire a tutor, her future husband Edward. Spencer’s education reflected an ideology of one of the most prominent black thinkers of the Harlem Renaissance, W.E.B. DuBois, a luminary who later became a companion of Spencer’s.

During the turn of the century and into the 1920’s, the state of African-American education became an increasingly significant topic. Black educators had a tremendous responsibility on their hands. W.E.B. DuBois’ “Talented Tenth” asserts that education is the key stepping stone in the success of the Negro race:

The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is a problem of developing the best of this race that they may guide the mass away from the contamination and death of the worst, in their own and other races (DuBois 1).



Two outstanding black educators, W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington, presented two options for the education of black youth. Washington believed that by giving the youth trades and making them active participants in the American economy, they would know how to make a living. DuBois heavily criticized Washington because instead of artisans, he wanted to make fully educated men, who besides artisans could just as easily be doctors or lawyers. Anne Spencer held DuBois' ideal, and corresponded with him during her fight to obtain equal educational opportunities for her students. She, too, wanted her students to know a vast amount of knowledge, including Western classics, literature, Greek and Latin. "The Talented Tenth"(1903) created a tradition of education that Spencer and some of her fellow educators adhered to. It was the passion to mold African-Americans into Locke's New Negro.

Locke's New Negro had the ability to think for himself, to be independent economically and socially. Earlier developments in African-American history provided a key foundation for the development of the New Negro. The growing middle-class was proof that the New Negro was coming into being, and so was the small, but influential number of black intellectuals, including Washington and DuBois. DuBois first attended Fisk University, and then Harvard University, giving him key insight into a predominantly white institution and an institution that was founded for blacks. This awareness of both communities would later manifest itself in "The Talented Tenth", where DuBois pushes for the necessity of black colleges and black teachers. Though DuBois and Washington were both notable examples of Locke's New Negro, they had differing views on how to further the growth of more New Negroes in the classroom. Washington promoted Negro common schools, which taught blacks to read, write, and



cipher, concentrating on agricultural trades. In “The Awakening of the Negro”(1896), Washington defines the necessities of African-Americans.

What are the cardinal needs among the colored people in the South, most of whom are to be found on the plantations? Roughly, these needs may be stated as food, clothing, shelter, education, proper habits, and the settlements of race relations(Washington 1).

DuBois preceded Locke’s “new leadership” through the ideology of his “Talented Tenth.” He attacked the ideology of Washington in the Niagara Movement (1904-1906) in his “Address to the Nation”, a collection of black leaders who were adamant that the Negro common school, which stressed industrial training, needed an alternative. The Niagara Movement promoted civil rights and political rights, because like DuBois, they believed that the political forum and the universities that covered all avenues of education (the arts and sciences), rather than working behind the plow, would produce future leaders, what DuBois termed “exceptional men.” “A university is a human invention for the transmission of knowledge and culture from generation to generation, through the training of quick minds and pure hearts, and for this work, no other human invention will suffice, not even trade and industrial schools” (DuBois 1).

The words and actions of DuBois and Spencer represent the alternative. Locke believed that the New Negro was “a thinking Negro.” The thought process would free itself from the submissive days of Reconstruction and the fears of lynching to reveal a race conscious and a self-conscious African-American. The “thinking Negro”, as interpreted by Locke, presented himself in various guises, including Spencer’s two occupations, education and literature.

The migrant masses, shifting from countryside to city, hurdle several generations of experience at a leap, but more important, the same thing happens spiritually in the life-attitudes and self-expression of the Young Negro, in his poetry, his art, his education and his new outlook, with the additional advantage, of course, of the





poise and greater certainty of knowing what it is all about. From this comes the promise and warrant of a new leadership (Locke 1).

Though she was frustrated at times, Spencer still saw the value of a liberal arts education. She made it an effort to provide access for black children to read more literature. Spencer lent many of her own books to Dunbar's poorly equipped library facilities, an extended room of Jones Memorial Library for black Lynchburg readers (Greene 84). Grimke received a liberal arts education, taking such courses as Anglo-Saxon poetry and eighteenth-century literature (Hull 116), then became a teacher who encouraged her students to write compositions on "My First Love", "On Being Colored", and "Vanity" (Hull 116), theoretical topics that encouraged them to stretch their minds. Douglas Johnson studied music at the Oberlin Conservatory in 1896, taking pleasure in writing music. In 1931, Douglas Johnson served as assistant principal and a music teacher in Atlanta. Both Grimke and Douglas Johnson were partakers and teachers of a DuBois-style education, an education that did not center on agricultural trades but rather an education that centered on more developed scholarship.

Because of Spencer's commitment to education, she is remembered fondly for their efforts.

She minimized her role in and effect on the intellectual life of the black community in Lynchburg, but testimony has it that she introduced many students to books and sparked the desire in them to continue their education after high school. She quickly became and remained a dynamic (and controversial) figure at Dunbar High School (Greene 84).

During the early 1900's, other women educators were being commended for their efforts, becoming models of determination and conviction. In 1924, the Child Welfare Department of the Russell Sage Foundation gave founder Janie Porter Barnett's Virginia Industrial School for Colored Girls an official stamp of efficiency, claiming it



was “one of the best” and “placed it on the list of the five grade-A institutions of this type in the United States” (Davis 285). A judge in the juvenile court in Richmond, Virginia similarly commends Barrett’s character and drive:

Mrs. Barrett and her workers are doing such wonderful work that they are transforming the lives of these girls, teaching them to work and to sew and do other things necessary in making a home, and sending them back to their communities as useful citizens. I cannot commend too highly the work being done (Davis 284).

Though Barrett’s students were learning trades, supporting Washington’s ideology, and Spencer’s students were learning poetry, supporting DuBois’ ideology, both educators made lasting impressions on their respective communities. Both Barrett and Spencer are examples of a notable collection of black women educators during the Harlem Renaissance.

During the 1920’s, women who were both educators and poets were exemplary figures. Spencer belongs to a collection of “Renaissance women”, women who succeeded in more than one public sphere. Renowned Harlem Renaissance writer Jessie Fauset, author of *The Chinaberry Tree* and *The Plum Bun*, was the first African-American to attend Cornell University. Fauset, one of the few female editors of her time and editor of DuBois’ *Crisis*, published several famous literary voices of the Harlem Renaissance, including Langston Hughes. Fauset was also a public school teacher at Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C., where she taught two subjects, French and Latin, that were fitting for a DuBois-style education. In addition to being an educator, poet, and an employee of the U.S. Department of Labor, Douglas Johnson hosted a celebrated salon in Washington, D.C., a literary club which drew the likes of Langston Hughes, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, and Gwendolyn Bennett. These evenings were exemplars of how black women made substantial impacts in different areas. In a 1927 meeting of the club, termed



the Saturday Nighters Club, one reporter commented on Douglas Johnson's extraordinary presence: "It is a remarkable social phenomenon to see [Douglas Johnson], who works eight hours a day in the Department of Labor, wielding a sheer force of personality in important influence" (Hull 166). Spencer hosted similar occasions in her house on Pierce Street, with guests including George Washington Carver, Paul Roberson, Hughes, Douglas Johnson, and Roland Hayes (Greene 68).

Spencer stands as a noteworthy contributor to a progressive period of African-American females as founders, educators, and poets. Her goal as an educator and the goal of her poem "Dunbar" are both suited to the last two lines of Spencer's "We Remember the Reverend Philip Morris": "The Hours bide, the marchers wait/ till another child can grow!"

### **Anne Spencer: The Activist**

Besides wearing the dual hats of educator and poet, Spencer was a well-known social activist that made a profound impact in her community. Her efforts to give education to black children, and her continued protest of Jim Crow transportation, reflect a time that spurned African-American progress. Her poetry and social work support the ideology of Locke's New Negro, even if it meant public ostracism by her neighbors.

DuBois and Spencer also shared a belief about who should be at the front of the classroom. DuBois believed that having a black, properly educated teacher in the classroom would benefit the children. "It placed before the eyes of almost every Negro child an attainable ideal. It brought the masses of e blacks in contact with modern



civilization, made black men the leaders of their communities and trainers of a new generation”(DuBois 5).

Spencer, likewise, campaigned for the ousting of white teachers at the black Jackson High School (Greene 85). She wanted to give her students DuBois’ example of prominent black professionals in the classroom, of which she herself was one. Her passion for teaching and fulfilling DuBois’ ideology to have a black teacher in every classroom led her to teach at the Virginia Seminary without pay. The Virginia Seminary had given her a university education, complete with courses in Greek, Latin, philosophy, chemistry, and mathematics, and she was aware of its benefits. As a student at the seminary, Spencer encountered opposition to DuBois’ educational ideology as well. When the head of the National Baptist Convention saw Spencer’s favorite teacher, Dr. Gregory W. Hayes, teaching Greek, he withdrew the one thousand dollar donation the Seminary received from the Convention. The members of the Convention did not approve of blacks learning Greek, of a minority obtaining a fuller education. Dr. Hayes continued to teach Greek despite the negative reaction, and Spencer saw firsthand the problematic, but profitable existence of a liberal arts education for blacks (Greene 27). Locke “thinking Negro” was heavily endorsed by the actions of DuBois and Spencer, but the general public, including the National Baptist Convention, were terrified about seeing the growth of Locke’s New Negro.

White author Lothrop Stoddard felt the same way as the leaders of the National Baptist Convention who balked at blacks learning Greek. Stoddard published his famous essay, *The Forum*, in 1927, a document that argues that the color lines cannot be erased. Stoddard was adamant that any progress was merely an illusion.





In many Negro minds a new hope is being torn-a hope more alluring than any which has arisen since the ill founded aspirations of half a century ago. Therefore, for the Negro's own sake, as well as the interests of the social peace, he ought to be told-tolerantly, yet unequivocally- that this new hope is a delusion, which if persisted in, will lead to unnecessary disappointments and misfortunes.

Stoddard's viewpoint was clearly shown in American society, in the form of minstrel shows and the infamous film *Birth of a Nation* (1920) by D.W. Griffith. The presentation of blacks within these artistic forms prompted Locke to present the "New Negro", the economically and socially secure Negro, and the literary figures of his time took on the charge, including Langston Hughes. Hughes notes:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame...We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves (Hughes 692).

Spencer felt the same charge in her social activism and in her poetry. Spencer and several of her peers organized a local NAACP chapter in 1918 to alleviate racial tension (Greene 48). James Weldon Johnson introduced the idea to Spencer while touring the country to investigate lynchings and organize local chapters for the NAACP, where she served as executive secretary (Greene 49). Spencer wrote several racial protest poems based on local events that were directly tied to racial wrongs. The inspirations for Spencer's poems often came from things she read or her own personal experiences. An event in the Alabama-based publication, Monroe Work's *Negro Year Book*, read in her Lynchburg home, sparked Spencer to pick up her pen (Greene 130). A pregnant woman was seized by a lynch mob who cut her abdomen, thus killing the woman and her unborn child. Similarly, another of Spencer's racial protest poems, "The Sevignes", was inspired



by two sources. Spencer read an article in 1930 in *National Geographic Magazine* entitled “Louisiana, Land of Perpetual Romance,” A picture of a statue of Uncle Tom-like figure called “Old-Time Darkey”, adjoined the article, prompting Anne Spencer to pick up her pen (Greene 135).. In the poem, Spencer compares the statute not to Uncle Tom, but “Uncle Remus...a big plinth holding a little/ man bowing humbling to a master-mistress/ this shameless thing set up to the intricate involvement of human slavery/ go, see it read it with whatever heart you have left.”

The other source comes by way of French letters. French aristocrat Madame Marie de Rabutin Chantal, Marquise de Sevigne, was insensitive to the lower classes (Greene 136). Spencer skillfully draws two seemingly different sources into a union that profits the work. The Sevigne letters show a time of insensitivity to the aristocrats’ “other”: the lower class. The aristocrats did not recognize the equality of human beings. “The seventeenth century in France was...a time of high civilization, but it was also a brutal time. Men were hard, cruel, and unscrupulous” (Maughm 18). Both cultures, seventeenth-century France and twentieth-century America, had a part of the population that did not believe in equality for all mankind.

Spencer was not removed from the quandary of writing about race. One of her most famous “White Things” is evidence that she was just as concerned with racial problems. James Weldon Johnson’s historical magazine *Crisis* published “White Things” in 1923. Centrally, the poem is about the plight of African-Americans. The poem opens with a universal image of natural harmony. “Most things are colorful things- the sky, earth, and sea” (line 1). The sky, earth, and sea are united in a vibrancy of color, limitless bodies that merge together. The people associated with them, however, have been given



limits. "Black men are most men; but the white are free!" (line 2). The "white things" in the poem seemingly come from an unknown place. "White things are rare things; so rare, so rare/ They stole from out a silvered world- somewhere" (line 3-4). Yet, their presence in the new space, "the earth-plains fair plains/ save greenly grassed"(line 5) has dire effects. "They strewed white feathers of cowardice, as they passed" (line 6). Spencer believes the "white things", the white men, are cowardly, leaving small ("feathers of cowardice"), but lasting marks on all they encounter. The world that existed before their arrival was clean and pure. "The golden stars with lances fine/ the hills all red and darkened pine" (line 7-8). But the purity of the natural setting, the world where black men are not free, has decayed because of the presence of "white things." "They blanched with their wand of power/ and turned the blood in a ruby rose/ to a poor white poppy-flower" (line 9-11). Spencer offers an articulate racial protest poem using her characteristic natural imagery to highlight the societal ills of America.

Spencer, Grimke, and Douglas Johnson were all proud of their African-American heritage. In her diary, Spencer said:

"I have no academic honors, nor lodge regalia. I am a Christian, by intention, a Methodist by inheritance, and a Baptist by marriage. I write about some of things I love, but have no civilized articulation for the things I hate. I proudly love being a Negro woman- it is so involved and interesting" (quoted in Hull 93).

Grimke makes her racial pride evident in "The Black Finger." The last two lines of the poem are incredibly optimistic. "Why, beautiful, still finger are you black? And why are pointing upwards?" The image of a black finger pointing upwards is an image of hope, a sign that African-Americans are on their way up. Grimke was also a noted activist against lynching, a topic that recurred in her drama and fiction. Her famous play



*Rachel* touches on the controversial issue of lynching. At age nineteen, Grimke collected signatures for an anti-lynching petition, and many of her works were in response to the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill of 1922 (Hull 131).

However, writing solely about race met the consternation of African-American authors. In a 1941 letter to fellow Harlem Renaissance luminary Arna Bontemps, she admitted that she did not like “writing racially”:

Whenever I can, I forget my special call to sorrow and live happily as I may. Perhaps that is why I seldom elect to write racially. It seems to me an art to forget those things that make the heart heavy. If one can soar, he should soar, leaving his chains behind. But, lest we forget, we must now and then come down to earth, accept the yoke and help draw the load (Hull 179).

Spencer similarly felt obligated to write about racial concerns, but made it a point to address universal topics (love, death) in her poetry.

### **Anne Spencer: The Universal Poet**

Though Spencer’s body of work contains racial protest poetry and feminist concerns, the large majority of her work embody universal concerns: love of her craft, love of freedom, and the aging process. Spencer’s hybrid nature allows her to present many themes in her poetry, of which “Untitled” is a perfect example.

“Untitled” is a protest poem different from “White Things” and “TheSevignes”, the most important difference being that the poem is about freedom for an Irish foreigner rather than an African-American. “Untitled” was written around the same time as “White Things”. The poem’s protagonist, Terence MacSwiney, was an Irish hero who went on a hunger strike in protest of the English domination of his native land. The beginning of the poem secures MacSwiney as a national hero, a person Irish lads are proud of. “Terence MacSwiney/ in days gone by many an Irish lad, had I called you/ would have





answered 'I am here', for yours was only/ a name to live by." The actual playing out of the hunger strike is conveyed in short, declarative statements, emphasizing that these actions are powerful enough to stand on their own. MacSwiney "woke at dawn/ slept at eve/ ate what food/ drank what drink/ warmed by peat as you breathed it." The food and water are metaphorical, nature providing MacSwiney's nourishment. The actions are innocent and heroic, a term Spencer calls a "boy's day." But similarly to Spencer's feminist poems, purity is invaded by a darker presence, in this case the British colonization of Ireland. "But one day you slept too long/ when you awoke you were a man- in a land you never saw before/ rightly nor had you known before the whole state." The British infiltrate Ireland, kings who built "stone on stone to house the rich", encroaching upon "hovel on hovel to cover the poor." The talk surrounding the action is idle, fruitless, in a world where Irish "talk is as the wind." Yet, Spencer ties MacSwiney's plight to the entire state of Ireland, implying that they can act against social wrongs. "What?/ I have something- I can lay down, I can take it up again/ this I do for Erin, my beloved land." The disenfranchised do not have to cower in hovels; they can follow MacSwiney's example and take up the heroic actions to disrupt the domineering British. "Terence, Terence in glory forever/ new lovers have another name to die by." Just as Spencer encourages her neighbors to fight conformity in "Neighbors", she wants the Irish to clothe themselves with MacSwiney's passion, his heartfelt desire to be regarded as a human being of value. Though the two audiences are different, American neighbors and the Irish poor, the ideals are the same. Spencer recognizes that freedom is not guaranteed to many populations, many areas of the world, a universal problem that can be solved through actions.



The same theme of unrealized freedom is addressed in Spencer's "Grapes Still-Life", a poem that concentrates on the image of grapes lacking roots. Though the theme is contextually centered around a natural object, the grapes represent the diversity of humanity finding a common bond in that "their root is white." The poem gives the allusion of solely being about the African-American race, focusing on the color of copper. "Snugly you rest, sweet globes/ aged essence of the sun/ Copper of the platter/ like that you lie upon." However, the poem shifts to other images that evoke unity among mankind. "'Concord, the peaceful one/ purpling at your side/ all the colors of his flask/ holding high in pride." Spencer herself acknowledged that she was multiracial (white, black, Native American), an American before anything else. The parts of the grape (the stamen red, the black pistil) share a heritage at the end. "'This too, is your heritage, you who force the plight/ blood and bone you turn to them/ for their root is white." By making reference to the white root of the grapes, Spencer is making a parallel to the adverse effect of living in an Anglicized culture, where copper, red, and black entities cannot thrive because they share a common root. Yet, on a larger scale, this poem argues for freedom as a whole, emphasizing the fact that their roots are white, but also taking into account the "concord" of the grapes.

In many of her poems, the themes are strictly universal. "Epitome" is a relatively short work that uses free verse rather than rhyme. The theme of the poem differs, centering on a narrator who recognizes that she is ignorant in her youth. The poem does not take place in a particular setting, but follows on the temporal framework of Spencer's life. "Once the world was young/ for I was twenty and very old." Spencer admits that in her youth, she thought she knew all the answers. She shares her mentality



with another person in the poem, her lover, who is presumably Edward. Edward and Anne do not know the limits of time, a youthful attitude toward the world that centers on their love. "What the day was, how the hours would turn/ one dial was there to see." The world then ages around her ("now the world is old"), but she is still young because she is ignorant. "For the young know nothing, nothing."

This poem was written after Spencer and her husband were unable to answer their daughters', Alroy and Bethel, questions about random subjects (Greene 149). Spencer's parental response was to acknowledge that she did not know, that she was ignorant of some things. The situation surrounding the poem is bereft of racial protest, social activism, and feminism. It is solely a familial, personal poem, supporting Spencer's attention to universal truths, such as parents being unable to answer their children's questions. The free verse offers the illusion of a monologue, a piece where Spencer admits her faults. It is a poem of intensity and individualism, allowing readers to see Spencer as a mother and a person.

Another poem that makes heavy use of Spencer's personality through the intimacy of free verse is "Dear Langston." Unlike the formalities of quatrains and sonnets, free verse is a form that gives the illusion of the narrator's train of thought. The human mind does not think in rhyme, thus allowing a more accessible voice for the reader. Spencer and Hughes shared a literary appreciation for one another. Hughes sent her newspapers, clippings, and cards, and most importantly, he sent her his poems for criticism. She also sent him her poems (Greene 75). "Dear Langston" reflects their literary reciprocity, as Spencer meditates on her state as a poet. "Dear Langston/ and *that* is what my days have brought/ and this: a lamp, odorless oil round its dry wick." The continuity of writing



under a “lamp, odorless oil round its dry wick” now has a dullness about it, a striking contrast to “1975”, where the continuity was pleasurable. The subject of her poems are similarly melancholic. “Hope without wings/ love itself condemned/ where Michael broods.” An angel, Michael, brooding suggests that the heavens are running dry when it comes to Spencer’s poetical inspiration. The narrator is in a period of melancholy herself; her life is painfully monotonous. “Arc after arc, you see/ if any where I own/ a circle it is one frustrate beginning.” By placing the poem in a letter, dated to Hughes in 1928, it suggests that these feelings are momentary, which would account for the opposite reaction to poetical inspiration in a later poem, “1975.” “Dear Langston” most personally is about Spencer’s trust in Hughes as a poet. She shares with Hughes her inability to make sense of the world, her writer’s block. Directed at Hughes, who continually praised Spencer’s work, it is a personal confession about Spencer’s struggles while writing. The work shows Spencer’s fragility as a human being, lacking the self-confidence to move ahead, a universal feeling that is not tied to a single race or gender.

Though Spencer is frustrated with the “death” of poetry for her uneducated pupils, “1975” shows her appreciation for the craft of poetry, a tool she learned in her education. The last poem Spencer composed, “1975” is a reflection on how her garden has inspired her poetry. The poem is free of rhyme, a rarity in Spencer’s canon. Yet, the tone of the poem is characteristically Spencer. The narrator is confident, giving instructions on how to manipulate nature for her own purpose. “Turn an earth clod/ peel a shaley rock.” These are both arduous, time-consuming jobs for a gardener, but well worth the effort. Spencer compares the difficult nature of a gardener and a poet, who has the harder task of imagining the specificity of an earth clod being turned and a shaley rock





being peeled. Spencer's two passions are not easily done or explained, but they compliment each other. They both make use of the earth to create something richer, a flower or a sonnet. Though the two initial images are hard tasks, the third image evokes a love for the process of gardening and writing. "In fondness molest a curly worm/ whose familiar is everywhere." The worm is perceived as a muse, an image that provides inspiration for a writer, the sole life among the earth and rocks. The worm is energetic, nature is active, and the gardener sees the artistic possibilities in the realm of the garden. "Will light the word that tells the poet what a poem is." For Spencer, whose garden was her life-long muse, it is a fitting last work. Incredibly personal, "1975" is a reflection of Spencer as a woman gardening and a woman writing.

Spencer's poetry canon is not orientated by one concern, one theme, or one subject. Her subjects are often united in their search for freedom: from the British, from white society, or from male domination. Her narrators are men expressing their sexual desires ("Before the Fest of Shushan"), writers frustrated with their work ("Dear Langston"), or an older woman looking back at her youth ("Epitome"). She is a hybrid of many different themes, narrative voices, and styles.

Anne Spencer is a hybrid of many strands of the Harlem Renaissance movement: the push for Locke's "New Negro" in the classroom, its use of Victorian traditions, its collection of notable women who had many influential occupations, and its thematic breadth (topical and universal issues). Her first published poem, "Before the Feast of Shushan" highlights Spencer's thematic hybridity, and her last poem, "1975", shows her appreciation for the power of her craft. As an activist, educator, and artist, Spencer never fell into a single category. In her social activism, she worked for racial awareness in the



formation of the NAACP chapter, but also educational awareness in her push to get black teachers in black classrooms. As an educator, she was both a product of a DuBois-style education and a teacher and librarian who advocated his ideologies. As an artist, she wrote about societal limitations for women and African-Americans, but also wrote about universal feelings (love, frustration). Spencer is a true representative of the Harlem Renaissance's breadth and its literary prowess. Dying at age ninety-two, quietly in her bedroom, and some of her poetry still left to be recovered, Spencer left a profound body of work. In his poem, "On Anne Spencer's Table", Langston Hughes is right in his assessment of his life-long friend:

On Anne Spencer's table  
There lies an unsharpened pencil---  
As though she has left unwritten  
Many things she knows to write.

Given Spencer's artistic complexity and her involvement in many spheres, it is impossible to doubt Hughes. In her life, her poetry showed the broadness of her mind, her hunger to grapple different subjects. If Spencer had lived, it is highly likely that she would write on the issues of today. The unsharpened pencil on Spencer's table would have been put to good use. Spencer wrote about many things, a Harlem Renaissance hybrid in her life and in her craft.



## **Anthology of Anne Spencer's Poems**

(contains poems in the order as they appear in the thesis)

### **Before the Feast of Shushan**

Garden of Shushan!

After Eden, all terrace, pool, and flower recollect thee;  
Ye weavers in saffron and haze and Tyrian purple,  
Tell yet what range in color wakes the eye;  
Sorcerer, release the dreams born here when  
Drowsy, shifting palm-shade enspells the brain;  
And sound! ye with harp and flute ne'er essay  
Before these star-noted birds escaped from paradise awhile to  
Stir all dark, and dear, and passionate desire, till mine  
Arms go out to be mocked by the softly kissing body of the wind --  
Slave, send Vashti to her King!

The fiery wattles of the sun startle into flame  
The marbled towers of Shushan:  
So at each day's wane, two peers -- the one in  
Heaven, the other on earth -- welcome with their  
Splendor the peerless beauty of the Queen.

Cushioned at the Queen's feet and upon her knee  
Finding glory for mine head, -- still, nearly shamed  
Am I, the King, to bend and kiss with sharp  
Breath the olive-pink of sandaled toes between;  
Or lift me high to the magnet of a gaze, dusky,  
Like the pool when but the moon-ray strikes to its depth;  
Or closer press to crush a grape 'gainst lips redder  
Than the grape, a rose in the night of her hair;  
Then-Sharon's Rose in my arms.

And I am hard to force the petals wide;  
And you are fast to suffer and be sad.



Is any prophet come to teach a new thing  
Now in a more apt time?  
Have him 'maze how you say love is sacrament;  
How says Vashti, love is both bread and wine;  
How to the altar may not come to break and drink,  
Hulky flesh nor fleshly spirit!

I, thy lord, like not manna for meat as a Judahn;  
I, thy master, drink, and red wine, plenty, and when  
I thirst. Eat meat, and full, when I hunger.  
I, thy King, teach you and leave you, when I list.  
No woman in all Persia sets out strange action  
To confuse Persia's lord --  
Love is but desire and thy purpose fulfillment;  
I, thy King, so say!

### **Any Wife to Any Husband: A Derived Poem**

This small garden is half my world  
I am nothing to it—when all is said,  
I plant the thorn and kiss the rose,  
But they will grow when I am dead.

Let not this change, Love, the human life  
Share with her the joy you had with me,  
List with her the plaintive bird you heard with me.  
Feel all human joys, but  
Feel most a “shadowy third.”

### **Lady, Lady**

Lady, Lady, I saw your face,  
Dark as night withholding a star . . .  
The chisel fell, or it might have been





You had borne so long the yoke of men.  
Lady, Lady, I saw your hands,  
Twisted, awry, like crumpled roots,  
Bleached poor white in a sudsy tub,  
Wrinkled and drawn from your rub-a-dub.  
Lady, Lady, I saw your heart,  
And altered there in its darksome place  
Were the tongues of flames the ancients knew,  
Where the good God sits to spangle through.

### **Neighbors**

Ah, you are cruel;  
You ask too much;  
Offered a hand, a finger-tip,  
You must have a soul to clutch.

### **Dunbar**

Ah, how poets sing and die!  
Make one song and Heaven takes it;  
Have one heart and Beauty breaks it;  
Chatterton, Shelley, Keats, and I—  
Ah, how poets sing and die!

### **Grapes: Still-Life**

Snugly you rest, sweet globes,  
Aged essence of the sun;  
Copper of the platter  
Like that you lie upon.



Is so well your heritage  
You need feel no change  
From the ringlet of your stem  
To this bright rim's flange;

You green-white Niagara,  
Cool dull Nordic of your kind—  
Does your thick meat flinch  
From these...touch and press your rind?

Caco, there, so close to you,  
Is the beauty of the vine;  
Stamen red and pistil black  
Thru the curving line;

Concord, the too peaceful one  
Purpling at your side,  
All the colors of his flask  
Holding high in pride...

This, too, is your heritage,  
You who force the plight;  
Blood and bone you turn to them  
For their root is white.

### **White Things**

Most things are colorful things--the sky, earth, and sea.  
Black men are most men; but the white are free!  
White things are rare things; so rare, so rare  
They stole from out a silvered world--somewhere.  
Finding earth-plains fair plains, save greenly grassed,  
They strewed white feathers of cowardice, as they passed;  
The golden stars with lances fine,  
The hills all red and darkened pine,



They blanched with their want of power;  
And turned the blood in a ruby rose  
To a poor white poppy-flower.

They pyred a race of black, black men,  
And burned them to ashes white; then,  
Laughing, a young one claimed a skull,  
For the skull of a black is white, not dull,  
But a glistening awful thing  
Made, it seems, for this ghoul to swing  
In the face of God with all his might,  
And swear by the hell that sired him:  
"Man-maker, make white!"

### **The Sevignes**

Down in Natchitoches there is a statue in a public square  
A slave replica—not of Uncle Tom, praise God  
But of Uncle Remus...a big plinth holding a little  
    Man bowing humbly to a master-mistress  
This shameless thing set up to the intricate involvement  
    Of human slavery  
Go, see it read it with whatever heart you have left.  
No penance, callous beyond belief.  
For these women who had so lately fled from the  
    Slavery of Europe to the great wilds of America.

### **[Untitled]**

Terence MacSwiney  
In days gone by many an Irish lad, had I called you  
Would have answered "I am here", for yours was only  
A name to live by.  
You raced with the wind along your glittering shore



Woke at dawn  
Slept at eve  
Ate what food  
Drank what drink  
Warmed by peat as you breathed it.  
That was a boy's day  
But one day you slept too long—  
When you awoke you were a man—in a land you never saw before  
Rightly nor had you known before the whole state  
Stone on stone to house the rich,  
Hovel on hovel to cover the poor  
Talk is as the wind. What?  
I have something—I can lay it down, I can take it up again  
This I do for Erin, my beloved land.  
Terence, Terence in glory forever,  
Now lovers have another name to die by.

### **Epitome**

Once the world was young  
For I was twenty and very old  
And you and I knew all the answers  
What the day was, how the hours would turn  
One dial was there to see  
Now the world is old and I am still young  
For the young know nothing, nothing.

### **[Dear Langston]**

Dear Langston,  
And *that* is what my days  
Have brought...  
And this lamp, odorless oil  
Round its long  
Dried wick:





Hope without wings  
Love itself contemned  
Where Michael broods—  
Arc after arc, you see,  
If any where I own  
A circle it is one  
Frustrate beginning---

1975

Turn an earth clod  
Peel a shaley rock  
In fondness molest a curly worm  
Whose *familiar* is everywhere  
Kneel  
And the curly worm sentient *now*  
Will *light* the word that tells a poet what a poem is



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